

**FACTORY FARMS, ARTIFICIAL ADDITIVES, AND MYSTERY MEAT:  
FOOD SAFETY RUMORS CONCERNING MODERN FOOD  
PRODUCTION**

**HONORS THESIS**

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## Introduction

The idea for this paper came out of a conversation between one of my classmates and professors during a class on food additives. The food chemistry professor was introducing the topic of high intensity sweeteners (i.e. artificial sweeteners with commercial names like Equal or Splenda). When introducing each of the different compounds, the professor would begin by telling a story about how they were discovered. For instance, he reported the discovery of saccharin, the sweetener used in Sweet’N Low, was made by Constantine Fahlberg at Johns Hopkins. Fahlberg was a chemist working with the compound for some unnamed reason. Fatefully, he didn’t wash his hands well enough when leaving the lab one night and noticed the bread he was eating at dinner was unusually sweet, and so saccharin was then recognized as an alternative for sugar.

When the professor came to describing the origins of aspartame, my classmate raised his hand and said he already knew the story for that one. The student said that the United States army had been looking to develop an agent of biological warfare and were stockpiling massive amounts of aspartame for that purpose. When the need for this agent went away, a commercial outlet for it had to be found. Someone realized that it was sweet and could be used in place of sugar, and so Splenda was marketed. The stories that the professor told were largely available on the internet, most on the Wikipedia site for each compound. The story for the biological warfare agent, though less prevalent, was still easily found as well. Searching explicitly for “aspartame, biological warfare” returns a lot of results. Piecing together some of the stories available online, it seems that aspartame was a product of the G.D. Searle & Company and at the time of its discovery, Donald Rumsfeld was CEO. Rumsfeld is best known for serving as the Secretary of Defense during both the Ford and Bush administrations. His role as the Secretary of Defense is

referenced on websites claiming aspartame was originally a biological weapon and it lends credence to the claims that aspartame is actually detrimental to human health and was approved by regulatory agencies like the FDA through some kind of internal maneuvering. When the student finished his briefer version of the story, the professor said he had not heard that one and continued with the lecture.

While the professor may not have been familiar with that particular iteration, he was undoubtedly familiar with stories of its kind. In fact, this story was probably lost in the sea of stories like it available on the internet. I followed the professor up to his office after class to ask if he knew anything more about it. He responded, “It’s not true, but there’s a whole lot of stories like that out there. You know people don’t like food additives.” And he’s right, although the mistrust many consumers have of the food industry extends beyond the general category of additives. Internet postings, conversations among consumers, and even the genesis of products marketed as organic or natural suggest the growing trend. As a food science major, my interest in researching this topic is a seemingly conflicted one. Food science prepares students for work within the food industry, and most graduates go to well-known companies for employment. Moreover, my family has been involved in farming or agriculture for a long time, so most of the people I know tend to share the same ideas on food safety, similar to those of my professor. But these ideas do not conflict with the intention of this project. By its very nature, the “truthfulness” of the stories consumers tell about food safety is not as important as the motivations behind why certain stories get told. Patricia A. Turner describes the significance of sharing certain stories in her book *I Heard it Through the Grapevine* as contributing, “to an individual’s or a culture’s worldview. When they coalesce into a single pattern, these elements offer insights into a given person’s or people’s attempt to develop a cogent sense of order” (1994:23). The volume of food

safety rumors available suggests a pattern, and this project seeks simply to collect a portion of them to better delineate that particular worldview.

Delineating the types of stories useful for this work proved more challenging given the variety of forums in which they are shared. The aspartame story would seem to most cleanly fall into the category of urban or contemporary legend. The urban legends surrounding “the razor blade in the apple,” which caution parents to be suspicious of their children’s Halloween candy, are characterized by Best and Horiuchi below. Besides the distant connection of food safety, noticeable similarities exist between their example and the aspartame stories:

Urban legends may even have a factual basis... Whether a legend begins with a real incident or as a fictional tale, it is told and retold, often evolving as it spreads. [It] is maintained through orally transmitted warnings about the dangers contemporary sorcery poses for the traditional custom of trick-or treating. These warnings, which greatly exaggerate the threat, are an urban legend (1985:492).

In the case of aspartame and other artificial sweeteners, the warnings about its dangers are often connected with the pitfalls of modern food production. Most of the anecdotes collected here suggest a fear about the way food is being produced, an underlying concern that something is wrong with the system. However, not all the interviews with consumers yielded these types of stories, and many lack the kind of narrative quality found in the sweetener anecdotes. Some are more like statements about what the teller feels is right or wrong. Others are personal accounts, which differ fundamentally from contemporary legends, the teller uses to advocate for a particular worldview. In *Manufacturing Tales* (1992), Gary Allen Fine suggests the inherent difficulty in trying to resolve contemporary/urban legends and rumors from one another, landing on a working definition that legends have more longevity than rumors. Nonetheless, Fine also recognizes that the stories, be they rumor or legend, have more similarities than differences. At the start of this project it seemed that much of the story telling about food safety would follow

the model set forth by the aspartame story; however, the results from field work yielded such different findings that the scope for the project had to be expanded. Instead of focusing only on legends or rumors, the material that most clearly encapsulated a particular idea was chosen. In the following chapters, images from the internet, Facebook postings and discussions, as well as the range of statements and stories from personal interviews are included.

The texts come from a variety of sources. Some things, like the aspartame anecdote, images, and Facebook discussions, were part of conversations people were having independent of my interest. In total, I conducted eleven interviews. One included a group discussion with an international studies class focusing on modern technologies. The group contained approximately ten people and functioned more like a small focus group. The remaining interviews I conducted in one-on-one sessions either over the phone or in person with individuals actively interested in food issues. I will be using “motivated food consumers” to represent those interviewed as it can be generally applied to anyone who has a special interest in food production and consumes accordingly. That is to say, it encompasses a wide range of often interrelated issues including animal rights/welfare, minimal processing, environmental responsibility, GMO’s, and avoidance of particular ingredients, to name a few. While the term “motivated food consumer” is limiting in that it does not account for the nuances of each of these issues, it does provide a way of referencing the general worldview being explored in this work. Moreover, the different issues are often related and a consumer who is concerned with one is more likely than not concerned with many of the other issues as well. Motivated food consumers were identified through personal contacts as well as formal channels by requesting interviews from leaders within organized groups interested in related topics. These included faculty and staff at The Ohio State University,

young professionals living in the Columbus area, officers of a local food cooperative, and employees of a Columbus-based special interest group promoting local foods.

The conversations with motivated food consumers show definite trends; it would seem that many of the same motivations exist among individuals who are concerned with food production. Three trends emerged most clearly and were used as the framework for the three main chapters which follow. Chapter one deals with the distrust of large, corporate food businesses. This includes both “factory farms” or large scale agricultural production, as well as food processors and brand names which are viewed as “big business.” While most consumers acknowledge that they cannot produce all their own food, relinquishing production to faceless, amoral, profit seeking companies appears to be an unsatisfying alternative. Chapter two focuses on the concern that modern food is synthetic, fake, and not only less healthy than food that our great-grandparents consumed, but perhaps even unsafe and the root of chronic disease. The notion that aspartame was being considered for biological warfare and is now being sold in bulk for people to sprinkle on their breakfast cereal and mix in their coffee speaks to issues addressed in this chapter. Finally, chapter three involves the sense of control motivated consumers often seek when purchasing food. While individuals cannot realistically produce all their own food, they may attempt to know the people who do and how it is done. This knowledge, coupled with their choice on who to purchase from, empowers motivated food consumers and gives a sense of control over the production in which they are otherwise uninvolved. It is apparent that these three chapters address issues which are closely related. Dividing them into separate chapters is more for convenience than because they represent completely distinct themes as many of the examples speak to multiple ideas. The preoccupations of motivated food consumers are informed by a variety of sources and are equally complex in how they manifest in consumerism and are

articulated during interviews. This project represents only a brief analysis of some of the most salient themes, but they are certainly some of the most prevalent issues concerning contemporary food production.

## Chapter 1: The Business of Food

*“I don’t support agribusiness. If it has a well known label or is processed, I will not buy it”*

In most of the conversations concerning food safety and modern food production, one theme emerges as the most readily identifiable and best articulated. Consumer mistrust of large scale food production and processing is apparent and, in its way, colors a lot of the other prevalent sentiments concerning food safety. Whether it is stories about Monsanto’s unethical science or a general unease with food additives, there is a sense that the decisions about food production are being made by amoral, profit seeking companies who do not have the public’s best interest at heart. First world food production has been the responsibility of a relative few since the point of industrialization, rendering most consumers drastically separated from the origin and preparation of their foods. Perhaps this separation, in and of itself, would not be cause for consumer discontent if it were not also for the disparity between production practices of the modern period, and those used pre-industrialization. It would seem that the public connection to, and perception of, agriculture and food processing is more aligned with farming in previous centuries. And, of course, many general principles are still applicable when thinking about “where food comes from,” perpetuating those models. However, there are also adaptations to food production that are unique, not even to this century, but quite reasonably to the last 20 years alone. Modern food teems with genetically modified organisms, artificially synthesized, 0-calorie sweeteners, and partially hydrogenated soybean oils that are outside of the understood model of farming and food. But perhaps more importantly, these adaptations were implemented by a system in which the consumer was not directly involved. The relationship many have with their food is as recipient alone, which leaves the authority to decide how to produce food with

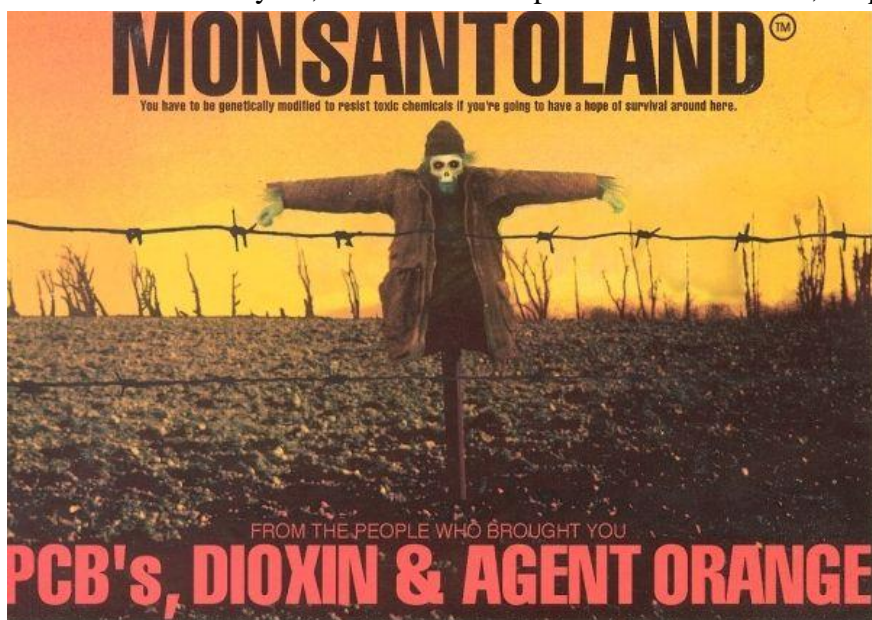


the relative few, most of whom the consumers are not even acquainted. I wait to more fully address the issue of authority in the final chapter on control, and instead focus now on anxieties over capitalism and corporation -- institutions which many motivated food consumers fear are holding the puppet strings when it comes to making decisions about food production.

A shining example of this fear is embodied in the slough of contemporary legends and rumors involving Monsanto. Many of the fears that consumers have about food production as a whole are often ascribed to Monsanto, a well known agribusiness, as an example. It is for this reason Monsanto serves as a kind of case study for anxieties about capitalistic food production. Gary Alan Fine's description of the Goliath effect is more than suitably applied here -- Monsanto may be the most Goliath of all food businesses. Historically a pesticide and fertilizer company, Monsanto switched its business interest from chemical goods to biological ones following the introduction and success of Roundup<sup>®</sup> Ready corn. Roundup was a pesticide patented by the company, and Roundup<sup>®</sup> brand seed products include a genetic insertion which confers pesticide resistance to the crops. This and other genetically modified organisms (GMO's) make up significant portions of the company's portfolio. Additionally, Monsanto would go on to acquire the rights to the production of the artificial sweetener Aspartame, and it is also behind the controversial milk hormone, rBGH. Even when Monsanto is not named directly by motivated food consumers, GMO's, artificial additives, hormones and antibiotics almost always are.

Monsanto hits most of the hot spots, and what makes it an even more ideal Goliath for conversations about food safety is its identity as a corporation undergirding agriculture, while not producing any foodstuffs itself. If motivated food consumers do not like "factory farms," then those same guiding principles lead to an even stronger repugnance for Monsanto. As an example, the video short entitled "Back to the Start" created by Chipotle, featuring a cover of Coldplay's

“The Scientist” by Willie Nelson, is rooted in the public distaste for large scale food production. In Chipotle’s short, a cartoon version of a traditional farmer walks by his livestock facilities which progressively become more mechanized, to the point where pigs are shuttled on conveyer belts to be boxed up and shipped out while pollution from the farm/plant leaks out at every turn. The movie concludes after the farmer makes a decision to return to the moral high road of food production and breaks down all the factories and frees the animals, with his family at his side. In the video, the good kind of farming is characterized by its simplicity, slow pace, and lack of man-made structures. By contrast, the bad kind of farmer treats livestock like inanimate commodities, before they are even rendered inanimate. The pigs are dealt with in the way an animal product would be handled after processing, even while they are still on the hoof. The suggestion being that there is a significant disconnect between the natural order of food production, which necessitates direct, bordering on one-on-one, contact with livestock, and the highly automated state of mass production which is the norm. Monsanto contributes to the efforts of these large scale food producers, and is actually worse by comparison with them. At least, the feeling might be, these large scale food producers are still more directly connected with farming than Monsanto. It is symptomatic of the problems with modern food production that the largest agribusiness in the world does not produce food or fiber. So, on the spectrum ranging from idyllic, traditional food production to modern, corporate driven food production, Monsanto



is off the charts. By simply doing a Google Image search for “Monsanto” it becomes immediately apparent just how vast the mistrust for this company is. The majority of the images are

*Figure 1*

negative responses. In fact, images from the company itself are far harder to come by than images which parody its trademarks or otherwise critique the business. The images tend to riff on one of three general criticisms. Skull and crossbones feature in a lot of the images, in particular those which take issue with Monsanto's history of chemical production (Figure 1). Images of this nature reference Monsanto's ownership of Agent Orange, pesticides, or artificial sweeteners.

Another kind of image flags Monsanto's development of GMO's (Figure 2). These images often show different organisms spliced together

(e.g. a tomato with the gills, fins, and tail of a fish), plants with human features like mouths or thumbs, or images of people who have acquired some kind of mutation themselves (pink coloring, glowing, deformation). Other images choose to focus on Monsanto as an industry leader and play up its policy of patenting its GM seeds. These patents require



Figure 2

growers to purchase seeds from the company every year in order to continue using their product, as opposed to saving seeds from the previous harvest. And, because the GM version of crops often out performs the wild type, Monsanto's products have become widely popular, causing others to question whether or not the company essentially "owns" farmers since it is perceived as having a monopoly on seed sales. Images of this kind show Monsanto trademarks on the globe and food, or rich looking businessmen persecuting farmers (Figure 3). The last image of this series speaks directly to the concerns of motivated food consumers who oppose the corporations that dominate the food production industry. The businessman's hand placed over the globe

indicates corporate control and the title “The world according to Monsanto” suggests the company’s misrepresentation of the facts. This title indicates that there is a kind of truth that is

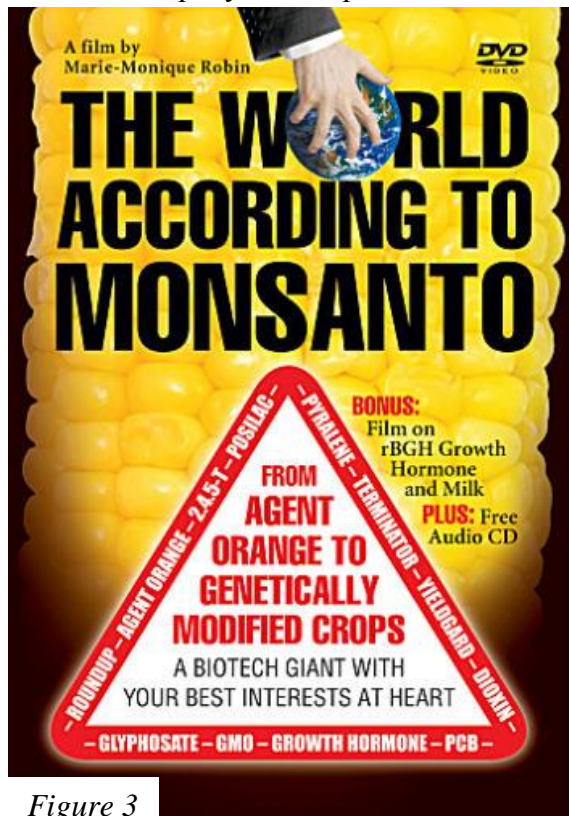


Figure 3

somehow different from the story Monsanto is feeding everyone. The reason for promoting this falsehood is identified in the subtitle “A biotech giant with your best interests at heart.” It is apparent from the context established in the image that “with your best interests at heart” is to be read with all due irony, prompting an understanding from the reader that the only thing the disembodied hand of Monsanto is concerned with is global, financial domination. By listing the controversial chemical and biological agents the message is clear, Monsanto is misleading the public, convincing them that their products

are safe so that the company can make more money. While the other images may not so explicitly make that connection, what is apparent in all the images is that the technology Monsanto is peddling is not safe. The conclusion that Monsanto is fervently selling unsafe products only to turn a profit is implicit.

The notion that big businesses are providing consumers with false information to improve sales can be found in conversations with motivated food consumers as well as images found on the internet. When asked what she thought was the most serious issue facing food production today, the president of the Clintonville Community Market said:

Misinformation. I think the biggest problem in our country is corporate control and because of that we not only get food of lesser quality because of agribusiness, but the media also tends to be interested in profit margins instead of health and accurate

information. I mean, you don't have to look very far to see what happens to reporters who investigate Monsanto...

She indicates, as do the images for Monsanto, that these products are inherently unhealthy and, moreover, that information is being withheld from the general public by companies for economic gain. When I asked her if she knew of any specific stories relating to Monsanto she said:

I do know about one reporter who contacted me through my blog I put out about how nuts it was that they (Monsanto) manipulated the information to these people about how there were no benefits in organic food... and a reporter in Chicago talked to me about how she and other reporters have struggled for years trying to get that story out there... (AS: why weren't they able to?) Whether it was the story was dropped or the request of an editor to leave the issue alone...it just never got published.

These kinds of anecdotes and images push the issue of corporate control to the level of full-scale conspiracy. Monsanto is well suited for such an anecdote since only a company of its size would be capable of perpetrating such a large scale cover-up, where news stories are requested to be withheld by an unknown superior, or interviews are mysteriously lost before they can be published. Monsanto incurs outrage for both its radical modernization of the food industry and for its sheer size and market share. The adaptations made to food products and processes that are patented by the company have lead to changes in food production, changes which conflict with motivated food consumers deep rooted sense of how food should be, and always has been, produced; the sense that food is a naturally occurring resource and should not be modified to the point of being patentable; and the sense that no company could be expected to make ethical decisions when so much money is on the line. The combination of these grievances speaks to the duality of fears about the capitalistic nature of the food industry. Motivated food consumers express concern for the tangible aspects of modern food production (the GMO's, the additives...)

but further interrogation of these concerns reveals the more fundamental issue concerning the trustworthiness of the system which approved the use of these products.

To be clear, the issues being raised in these examples are not *only* about corporate control of the market place. It is fair to say that motivated food consumers are also worried about the adaptations made to food itself and anxieties about the synthetic nature of some food, and manmade changes to food production, are addressed in the second chapter. Nonetheless, capitalism and greed garner much attention in contemporary legends about food. In many of these examples, the details about what exactly it is that makes the food bad are peripheral to the problem of a corporation lead industry. The previously referenced Chipotle video “Back to the Start,” shows images that are typical of assembly lines and are not actual representations of large scale farming, but certainly serve the purpose of getting the message about large scale food production across. A peer posted this video to his Facebook page and when I asked him what he thought the implications were in this video since it was clearly supposed to be persuasive, but did not show any real production practices (it’s a cartoon, for that matter) he responded:

Patents on intellectual property, GMOs, and the supplements that are used to make animals produce more in a smaller amount of time are kinda iffy in my book, but that's outside my area of expertise. I just think it's unique that as a part of Chipotle’s business strategy is drawing attention to the consistency of values between themselves and their suppliers. The Walmarts and McDonalds of the world could care less about what their suppliers are doing, as long as they supply them for cheap.

He clearly states that the details about the technology are “outside my area of expertise” and they are not really central to the thrust of his argument. What does inform his perspective is the nature of capitalism and the potential ramifications of allowing a business in that environment to play so large a part in introducing new technologies to the market place, especially ones that sound “iffy.” Echoing that sentiment is a self identified motivated food

consumer who says, in explaining her reasons for learning about her food, “I don’t trust people who are in food for the corporate aspect. Even in organics, I think there are people who are in it for the big business. In a capitalistic society I don’t think you can assume that someone has your best interests at heart if their interest is to make money.” Again, the details about the production are not the focus of this anxiety and, in fact, even if the product is organic it still may not address the concerns of motivated food consumers. What is being called into question is the motivation behind the producing agencies. If the company is motivated by money, and it is assumed that this is the primary motivation for all companies (although there also seems to be a positive correlation between greed and size of the company), then any other decision making factor falls to the wayside when it comes to issues of food safety. Central to this concern is the acknowledgement of limited individual agency when it comes to food production. It seems to be an understood reality of modern life that a person cannot be completely responsible for producing all the food they will ever consume. But, if this responsibility must be relinquished to someone else, then giving that responsibility to people with less economic incentive seems to help alleviate that anxiety. To a certain extent, motivated food consumers are seeking out producers who share their same values, as opposed to focusing on foods with particular attributes. This deemphasizes the food and becomes more about choosing someone to act in your place.

Another member of the Clintonville Community Market’s board of directors reinforces the notion that sometimes it is less about food with particular attributes and more about producers with similar values. After stating that he tries to avoid GMO’s because they are unhealthy, I asked him to describe, if it were possible to describe, what it is that makes GMO’s unhealthy. He qualifies his mistrust of GMO’s by suggesting that he would not have a problem



with them, and might actually be okay with eating them, if he could believe the research that was out there supporting their safety. He says, “If there’s someone making money, I question it. If they make something that saves money, they use it, and ask questions later. If there were reliable research out there, I might consider it, but the businesses have a stake in that, or if they had waited longer before using it. It really comes to not trusting corporations.” Other motivated food consumers I interviewed were less liberal in their sentiments on GMO consumption, ardently affirming that they would never be okay with them. However, this sentiment that “I would trust them if I thought I could” is shared by many. Even the claim that not all organic products follow the ideal production practices gets to this issue of corporate mistrust.

Although corporate mistrust has extended back through the decades, this particular moment may feed into the discussion about agribusinesses or, perhaps this discussion about agribusiness is another way for people to think about capitalism in this moment. News about corporate greed, bailouts, and the 1% have increased in salience to the extent that public wariness regarding corporations includes, but is not limited to, food. One motivated food consumer even suggests that connection by saying her concerns about food are spurred on, “any time you get too big, like the loan situation now.” The logic behind this statement follows that if industries like banks or car companies are not able to make the right choices when economically motivated, then there should be no expectation that any other business could resist that pull. Another principle often mentioned in conversations about corporate agriculture is that the current food system lacks economic justice. The same consumer who commented on her distrust of all corporations, including the large organic ones, says:

Food, to me, should be one of those inalienable rights, that every human should have access to healthy, good food. And Monsanto, especially, when they are patenting seeds and suing farmers, which is outrageous, for patent infringement -- the poor farmers,



number one, and number two, the things that are happening when a food is owned and it's about making money..."

Since companies are motivated by money, the ends seem to justify the means. The people who are negatively impacted by this policy extend beyond the consumer. In some of the previous statements, it was the consumer who was at the forefront of risk for consuming unsafe food made by companies who did not care about the health ramifications. But, when the conversation turns to economic justice, the scope of potential victims is broadened to include farmers, small business competitors, and less wealthy consumers who cannot afford to buy good food. An interview with an employee of the Columbus-based nonprofit, Local Matters, reveals that his major motivation is economic justice for individuals who cannot afford fresh produce, free range meat, and other products processed the way they should be. The challenge for consumers here is that large corporations are able to sell their product for less money than those who are producing it better. Economic justice takes the issue beyond the suggestion that greedy businesses will do anything for a cheaper product. Motivated food consumers who voice concerns about corporate domination are, again, not exclusively referencing the product quality itself but are instead concerned with the consequences for a market where the ideal product comes at a premium price.

While individual interpretations and actions relating to fears about capitalism and food safety may vary, there is an identifiable trend in the sentiments expressed about its danger. Most of these tendencies recognize the separation between contemporary consumers and family farms of the past. Motivated food consumers are critically aware of this separation and are concerned with the regulatory agencies and businesses that are now in charge of producing food on their behalf. One of their anxieties revolves around the motivations of those surrogate producers and whether or not modern producers are adhering to the same value system they themselves would follow. Augmenting this concern is the apparent difference in the way food production looks

now compared to the way it was done 50 years ago. Consumers are left in a position where they must depend on producers both for food and to make decisions about food and farming, industries with which people are no longer directly connected. This puts consumers in a position of deciding who it is they can trust, and what information is believable. In a class discussion, one man expressed his doubts by saying “a perfect example about the changing perceptions on health, even within my life time, I think, is eggs. It’s been back and forth at least three times over whether they’re healthy or not. It’s just a matter of who has the most lobbying power; they just want you to buy stuff.” Because of the changing perception about the healthfulness of eggs (high in cholesterol or great source of protein), this consumer feels that all media only serves to gain a competitive edge when it comes to food production , regardless of the truth. When it comes to food producing corporations, the details about *how* the food is made may be secondary, or at least may be more complicated to address, than the concern of *who* is producing the food. It’s hard to say what is wrong or what goes too far, especially if most people are not familiar with food production. So, instead, empowering those who appear trustworthy, as opposed to putting faith in the unknown, alleviates some of those concerns about who is in charge and what their decisions may be based on.

## Chapter 2: The Synthesis of Food

*“Maybe it all goes back to margarine. My mom would talk about, as a kid, getting the gray margarine with the dye packet to mix in. And, in some ways, that’s more honest about what kind of product it is. It’s like the poster child for synthetic food”*

In contrast to the previous chapter, which focused on the industry that produced the food, this section looks at the safety concerns motivated food consumers have regarding the food products themselves. Not only has production changed, but so have product compositions. The ingredient list and construction of today’s food differs from what consumers a few generations back were purchasing; nor are today’s consumers able to replicate, in a personal kitchen, a lot of the food produced by industry. This disparity sets the stage for consumer anxieties about the synthetic nature of food. Statements like the one about the relative health of eggs referenced in the last chapter (“It’s been back and forth at least three times over whether [eggs] are healthy or not. It’s just a matter of who has the most lobbying power”) can be used to discuss big business and food production, but also suggest consumers’ lack of confidence in any defined reality when it comes to commercial foods. Motivated food consumers often talk about wanting what is “real.” In the above case, the consumer comments on what he feels is a lack of authentic information, that which is not simply propaganda. On a more fundamental level, motivated food consumers are also uneasy about the consumption of foods which have, as one consumer put it, “additives and chemicals you can’t pronounce on the back of the label.” Foods which are perceived as synthetic, fake, or somehow “iffy” lead to consternation as issues of health and safety are brought to the forefront. However, conversations about this synthetic food include issues of safety as well as sentimentality and nostalgia. In more ways than one, consumers are looking for authenticity in their food consumption.

Michele Pollan speaks to this same subject when he suggests eating only things your grandparents would recognize. Not surprisingly, aspartame and propylene glycol do not make the cut. Motivated food consumers often seem to talk about avoiding products that contain additives and preservatives for health and safety reasons. One consumer said that she looked at the ingredient list to identify certain red flags. When asked what ingredients represented red flags she said those that were “produced in a lab, synthesized. There are just complex interactions we don’t understand. Why do we need a chicken analog? Shouldn’t chicken just taste like chicken? Then that makes me wonder, what did they do to it that makes it not taste like chicken?” This notion of complex interactions that we just cannot really understand underscores the apprehension surrounding food additives. Ingredients that have complicated names or sound like chemicals, clearly, are not real food. These additives take the place of real food to the detriment of the product and the unfamiliarity of these additive names conflicts with the sense that food should be something recognizable, as Pollan suggests. The cycle of food production and consumption is simply too complex to be tampered with safely. Helping to affirm that conviction when it comes to ingredient listings is the chemical sounding name of many additives (e.g. propylene glycol) which sound more like an accelerant or a combustible than a foodstuff.

Another motivated food consumer echoed some of these concerns when asked if she avoided additives. She replied “Yes! With a double explanation mark! I went to buy cottage cheese a few years ago and it had guar gum and corn syrup solids and, you know, why? I just want to buy milk curds or whatever. I buy very few packaged foods because of the additives.” She too is interested only in eating the real food (milk curds or whatever) and not other ingredients (guar gum and corn syrup solids) listed on the label. A striking similarity among both of these responses is the question *why* are these additives necessary? The addition of additives

themselves represents only part of the issue, the reason why additives are in foods is another.

What are food processors doing to chicken to make it not taste like chicken, as the first consumer asked, and why would cottage cheese need these other ingredients? The addition of additives raises questions about the real food ingredients as well. If these additives are necessary, the logic goes, then there must also be something amiss with the main line ingredients. Generally, there is a sense that we are doing something wrong in using these additives, or even needing to use these additives. Food producers may be trying to make something into food when it is not, or trying to extend food beyond its natural limits. The consequences of these actions are ill defined



*Figure 4:* Image from a special interest group suggesting a link between consumption of certain foods, like hotdogs, and cancer

but motivated food consumers express anxiety over the potential danger of consuming these products which could “cause long term health problems.” Chronic health issues such as obesity, cancer, and diabetes, all of which have been linked to diet, are

cited by motivated consumers as some of the effects that have resulted from the consumption of food additives (Figure 4). Test-tube foods are an inherent safety risk because they are not nature borne products. The fear that scientific intervention in food consumption may lead to unintended consequences comes out of the sense that food is part of a complex system that cannot be fully understood and miscalculations may lead to danger in the long run.

Other concerns about the ingredients list on commercial foods revolve around their length. Regardless of what the list is composed of, less seems to be more. Ingredient lists that lack additives with chemical sounding names but are nonetheless lengthy tend to be construed as highly processed and synthesized as well. Authentic food, it would seem, contains fewer ingredients than its commercial counterpart. The length of the ingredient list is often associated with creating food out of nothing, like with the previous synthetic additives example, or a hodge-podge of mismatched parts (Figure 5). In this scenario, though, the sheer number of ingredients

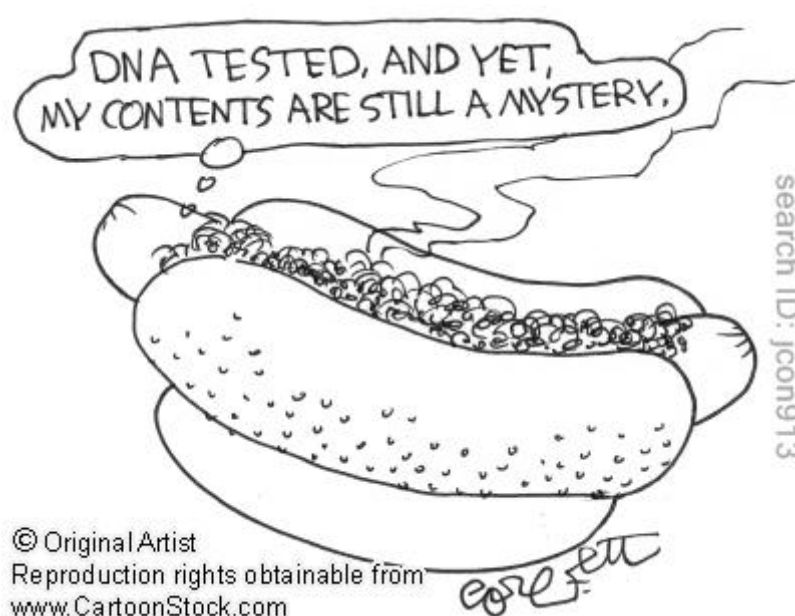


Figure 5

and put in food. Like people are actually eating wood, or eating wood and don't know it. I think I found that on GRIST.com. I found it interesting that the ingredient listed on the product label is just so far removed from what it actually is." The identity of the food product and its constituents are somehow separated from one another because of the complexity of the labeling, if not also the deceit of the manufacturer. Complicated food labels lead to the assumption that food companies are doing some creative, or even deceptive, formulating. In the process, the true

suggests the highly constructed nature of the foodstuff. And, the longer the ingredient label, the better companies are able to hide random, non-food ingredients. One motivated food consumer recalled an example, saying "I've heard that cellulose, which is actually wood, gets ground up beyond recognition

essence of the food product seems to be lost in addition to, it is often suggested, to the nutritional quality.

The ingredient list seems to be a battleground area for motivated food consumers. As mentioned previously, it is a place often checked in order to vet a product. However, it is also an area of great suspicion since food manufacturers may be trying to hide less desirable attributes from the attention of the consumer. As an example, the ingredient list for McDonald's McRib sandwich clocks in at 70 items, making it quite the spectacle among even not so motivated food consumers. The following dialogue was posted on a group chat on Facebook in response to an article about the McRib. The commenters are all employees within the agricultural industry, but clearly have a variety of different view points on the subject. The sandwich, as the article explained, is the brainchild of a meat scientist who came up with the product as a low cost version of an expensive cut of meat. Because of the conversation's relevance, I have included a large portion of it here:

GH: I just read this story too and wanted to throw up. I'm all for meat. The WHOLE food. Not this overly processed garbage.

PP: Why is it any grosser than sausage?

ST: "One would not know that the various edibles were ever living creatures, or that they all come from the soil, or that they were produced by work. The passive American consumer, sitting down to a meal of pre-prepared or fast food, confronts a platter covered with inert, anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravied, ground, pulped, strained, blended, prettified, and sanitized beyond resemblance to any part of any creature that ever lived. The products of nature and agriculture have been made, to all appearances, the products of industry. Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality. And the result is a kind of solitude, unprecedented in human experience, in which the eater may think of eating as, first, a purely commercial transaction between him and a supplier and then as a purely appetitive transaction between him and his food."

ST: Stirring the pot :)

PP: but sausage is delicious

ST: You win again...

GH: I'm kind of grossed out by sausage also. But I'm horrified of most all fast-food. Just bc something is labeled "edible" does NOT mean we should eat it. I know this is sin-like

to say here, but the reason I like Chipotle (and other food like it) is because I can see the WHOLE food — I see the corn, the bean, the tomato, the cilantro, the rice, the onion, and the chicken. It's not processed BY-PRODUCTS. For goodness sake, I hate the thought that I feed my CAT chicken by-products! Why would I want to eat it or give it to my children!?

DT: Me likey McRiby. Nom, nom nom... ;-)

JC: I'm grateful to the hog each time I eat his delicious sausage.

ST: Seriously though, the McRib is disgusting.

PP: But GH, aren't the meat scientists recycling meat products that might otherwise go to waste?

CL: I'm a little freaked out by its ability to be shaped into forms. Good for dough, maybe not so cool for meat. But I guess if there is a market ... I would hate to deny!

DT: Food choice is what we are all about here at..., no matter the production method, size, or real food your product is formed to resemble.

GH: I'm a big fan of recycling, but some things just don't need to be eaten, in my opinion. If you have to mix SEVENTY ingredients to get that "scientific meat," then I am OUT! But you are welcome to eat as many as you'd like. Also: McRib Pork Patty is made with preservatives BHA, propyl gallate, and citric acid. I'm not a big fan of eating carcinogens. You? (Because that's what BHA and propyl gallate are...and they are banned in most other countries.)

DT: You don't get something that tasty from scratch you know, and I definitely think it should be a crime for something to taste sooo goood. ;-)

The McRib dialogue hits on several issues that are exemplary of consumer anxiety concerning the synthetic nature of commercial food. Different participants in the discussion mention the long list of ingredients, debate the idea of a product synthesized to resemble other food, and reference cancerous ramifications. Although this group is generally affiliated with support of commercial food production, clear schisms in that support exist. As a food product, the McRib is extreme. So much so that when consumers are presented with the details of its creation (70 ingredients, molded to look like ribs, etc) their relative acceptance of the product comes down to their philosophical stance on food production. The McRib takes long ingredient lists and product development to their logical extremes, pushing consumers to refer back to their fundamental principles concerning food. Those who are unopposed see no reason why the McRib should not be accepted (“why is it any grosser than sausage?”) and those who oppose this kind of commercial food production find it appalling (“some things just do not need to be



eaten”). The motivated food consumers, as defined in this study, are here drawing attention to the disparity between the food components and the final product. They consider the fact that the constituents cannot be recognized in the crucially more important because it is in reference to commercial foods. If the discussion was about a ground meat product that was locally grown, grass fed, and organically produced, than the consumer’s ability to recognize individual components might not be so important. However, this food is from McDonald’s and the mistrust facing large scale food production makes the ingredient list and composition of the product far more salient issues. Although food corporations and food synthetics are treated separately in two different chapters, they are certainly not unrelated in the mind of motivated food consumers who often conflate their concerns associated with modern food production.

Another voice is identifiable in the McRib debate, different from those of the motivated food consumer (“some things just don’t need to be eaten”) and the consumer who is more accepting of modern food production (“why is it any grosser than sausage?”). This third consumer does not attempt to address the philosophical issues raised by the motivated consumers and instead responds with “Me likey McRiby. Nom, nom nom.” And when the suggestion of cancerous, synthetic additives is raised he casually replies “you don’t get something that tasty from scratch, you know.” The group I am calling extreme consumers tend to revel in the very aspects of the products that motivated consumers oppose, with an appropriate sense of postmodern irony. It has been suggested that these extreme consumers participate in a kind of festival-like activity (Merkes 2012) where other individuals in the community happily watch, perhaps with bewilderment, but these “once in a while” indulgences are generally accepted if not lauded (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Hotdog eating contest

However, without the necessary sense of irony, extreme consumers are castigated for their behavior. Paula Deen, as an example, has fallen under heavy criticism for her indulgent cooking style both before and after

her diabetic condition was announced. When her announcement became popular news, her recipe for a breakfast sandwich made with doughnuts as the bun was trotted out as a signature, damning example. Similar sandwiches are promoted in other venues (restaurants, fairs, eating contests) but are not as readily ridiculed because they involve an “OMG I can’t believe I’m eating this” factor with their consumption. By contrast, Deen suggested her sandwich be served at a ladies brunch. So, the meta-awareness and frivolity seem to be an integral part of extreme consumption and so too is the “in-your-face” nature of the gesture. Extreme consumers exhibit a certain irreverence towards the healthy standards and anxieties set forth by society. From television shows like *Man vs. Food* to cult-like devotion to notoriously low-end products, extreme consumers make light of some of the phobias associated with modern life and assert instead a kind of brash resistance to another kind of established hegemony.

Of course, motivated food consumers are, likewise, responding to a perceived hegemony, that of commercially produced, corporation run, processed foods. The resistance to these food products is often associated with health and safety, as has been discussed. The threat of cancer causing chemicals doled out by the hand of amoral profit seeking companies often figures in discussion with motivated food consumers. But the issues raised by motivated food consumers are often associated with a set of ramifications that range from the tangible to intangible – from

safety, to health, and beyond to something akin to experience. Many motivated food consumers are not only concerned with safety, but with retaining the pleasure of eating food as well. Though it might be noted that this pleasure associated with eating “good/real” food is often associated with the nebulous haze that is good health. Modern modifications to the food industry which perturb the innate deliciousness of a product may be tampering with the delicate balance of the health giving properties of the food too.

Even within the McRib dialogue there seems to be an implicit argument about how good the food is to eat, from a purely hedonistic perspective. The deliciousness of sausage, the McRib and Chipotle are referenced as justification supporting consumption. The Homer Simpson version of this logic is “if you are not supposed to eat cows, why are they made of food?” The simple fact alone that people desire to eat a product gives credence to the notion that it’s fit to be eaten. For motivated food consumers, the loss of quality they consider to be associated with commercial products reinforces the sense that they are inferior foodstuffs on even more fundamental levels. As one consumer puts it:

How can you not recognize that these egg beaters are not the same as this egg? This is what IT IS...this is life you’re holding in your hand if you’re looking at an egg or seed. How can you not taste the difference? When you take a cherry tomato right off the vine and it’s still warm from the sun and you get that burst compared to a cherry tomato you get from Kroger. How can you not tell the difference? I don’t understand it.

Her fervor for food is derived from the sensory characteristics associated with the product, those that make it somehow more real. The homegrown tomato provides more authenticity of experience than the ones at Kroger. The genuineness based on sensory quality is different but certainly related to the concerns over the legitimacy of foods with synthesized, chemical sounding ingredients and lots of ingredients. Both conversations take issue with the relative realness or fakeness of foods. But when quality and sensory attributes are the focus of

discussion, health and safety are peripheral to the implication that modern food production takes away from the human experience. Motivated food consumers are trying to convey dissatisfaction with what has been sacrificed in the name of convenience.

Food is often figured symbolically as a vessel for culture. The nostalgia for family dinners and comfort food is indicative of the emotional and deeply meaningful connection people have with food. The idea of culture and sentimentality being associated with food is generally acknowledged, and so it should come as no surprise that motivated food consumers see the mass production of hegemonic food as an affront to culture and as limiting expression. To combat the lesser quality, uniformity of the food system and everything that goes along with it, specialty food businesses offer products which address this desire for quality, choice, and expression. As an indication of this, the language used by specialty food businesses often figures food as more of an art form than as a commodity. In fact, many of these specialty producers are referred to as “artisanal” (Figure 7) and their products may be labeled “craft” which suggests the artistry and craftsmanship that goes into producing these foods.



On a guided tour of a local distillery, the owner likened their whiskey to art saying that, as with any other high quality, handmade product like paintings, one would “expect to see variability from batch to batch but it should always be high quality.” He also spoke anecdotally about another specialty producer who makes a notable effort to higher her employees out of the artistic community because of their attention to sensory details like flavor. For these

*Figure 7: Artisanal cured meat products*

artisanal producers, elevating the sensory experience of their food is of utmost importance. This emphasis is both about increasing the pleasure of consumption and expressing point of view. The same artisan distiller spent most of the tour, not showing the nuts and bolts of the processing equipment, but talking about their business philosophy and about how their philosophy was articulated through their product. Many of the choices motivated consumers make when purchasing food are expressions of certain beliefs, resistance to certain products and modes of production. However, on another level, foods produced by specialty businesses that are targeting (and often run by) motivated food consumers go beyond meeting the perfunctory requirements due to safety. These products gesture towards creativity and expression as an extension of culture.

The level of authenticity motivated food consumers are looking for extends from simplicity of ingredients to quality of experience and the reasons for seeking out “real” food in a sea of synthetic options range from safety concerns (avoiding cancer) and health maintenance (nutritional value seems diminished) to celebrating the pleasure of eating and expressing creativity and personal choice. The strong connection people have with food involves many aspects of well being and, to quote one motivated food consumer, food “is life.” Therefore, the care taken by motivated food consumers to ensure food purity relates to their overall perception of, and relation to, the human experience.

### Chapter 3: Controlling Food

*“There are so many things today that you don’t have control over, and food is one thing you do have control over”*

When considering some of the most common statements made by motivated food consumers, the sense that food and its production have become too complicated and foreign to most people becomes apparent. Anxiety over corporate control is rooted in fears that the wrong people are making the wrong choices about the American food supply and, furthermore, taking away the individual agency in making decisions about food. Anxiety over additives and the synthetic nature of food are rooted in fears about the unknown consequences of test-tube ingredients which might include loss of safety, health, and general well being. But, of course, it’s hard to say. Many of the statements from consumers suggest a concern with the safety of food, but stop short of making absolute claims about the ramifications of commercial food consumption. Many comment on the fact that we just don’t know what could happen, or rhetorically ask who really knows what companies are doing behind consumers’ backs. Alternatively, motivated food consumers also emphasize their personal efforts regarding self education (“I’m very committed to knowing how food is grown. As much as possible I try to do local food and I WANT TO KNOW”). When asked what qualifies them as motivated food consumers, respondents often mention all their reading on the subject and how they seek out the individual producers of their food. Information and knowledge regarding food consumption is crucially important, and seems to be a defining element of motivated food consumerism. Although, the details of this knowledge are not as important as the sense of knowledge gained. Similarly, the details about what production practices are good or bad are not set forth with as much alacrity as the value of meeting the individual producer. Knowing about food seems to be, in and of itself, more important than the specifics about what is known. This sense of knowledge

and connection returns agency to consumers, serving to alleviate anxiety over the lack of individual control in modern food production.

Both consumers who seek self education and specialty food businesses seeking to market to motivated food consumers try to cultivate this sense of connection between consumers and producers. Visual representations of the production process are used by a variety of different groups trying to appeal to interested consumers. Two dairies are using production and manufacture process images in their marketing methods, one local, Snowville Creamery, located in Southeastern Ohio and one national producer, Stonyfield. The prominence of production images, descriptions, and philosophies in the food market is relatively new. That is to say, more than fifteen years ago websites like those for the dairies would not have gained mass appeal, but the changing trends of consumer purchasing and the increasing desire for engagement with their food production has lead to the introduction of much of this kind of marketing. Production images, and the text that accompanies them, are used as marketing for certain businesses, to attract and inform consumers on their product. But, these images are equally suggestive of consumer influence on industry, requiring industry to meet the demands of a purchasing public. Speaking about her personal dairy choices, one motivated food consumer says, “I don’t do pasteurized milk, I don’t believe it’s healthy. I will do raw milk, I’m in a herd share. I’m kind of the same way with my meat, I find someone whose growing it the way I believe is right, then I’ll contract with them.” Her food consumption is contingently based on her awareness of the production practices being used and establishing a relationship with the producer. However, her qualification for determining what was “the way I believe is right” was more nebulous and seemed to be based more on a gut instinct of what is right, a kind of “I know it when I see it.” However, what is emphasized is that fact that the individual consumer has to see and be

informed about food production. The commodification of production practices is evidence of a cultural movement perhaps extending beyond the food industry. The importance of consumer knowledge and approval of production, and the interplay it implies between producer and consumer, is symbolic of consumers' attempt to impose order on the chaos of modernity by asserting the rustic. The rhetoric of businesses which use production images for self-promotion capitalizes on consumer desire for awareness and approval of industry techniques as means of reclaiming what has been lost as a society in the contemporary experience.

Because most people do not grow or raise, harvest or process, or often times even prepare their own food, knowledge about food is recognized as a scarcity and therefore comes at a premium. Modernity is associated with dependence on the system. As people become further separated from the family farm, the notion of the rustic Renaissance-man who manages most aspects relating to life becomes less of a reality and more of a nostalgic memory. This dependence on industry is, instead, the norm. Subsequently, food businesses which market their production practices and motivated food consumers seek to reevaluate the commonly accepted system. One person described this kind of food consumption as being, explicitly against the system saying, "I also think it's subversive, which I kind of like. I have a garden, and in my neighborhood people don't have gardens and Monsanto doesn't want people growing their own food." She directly calls out Monsanto, poster child for food/ag corporations as being against individual agency in food production and also comments on her desire to regain a kind of control. Specialty agricultural businesses, likewise, challenge the notion of modern food production as virtuous based on the criteria of efficiency and cost effectiveness. They propose, by contrast, the virtues of small agriculture, environmental care, and so on, as the basis on which food production ought to be evaluated. Value added food producers are, by definition, in a



position where they must assert the benefits of their product over that of the conventional option to the extent that consumers are willing to pay a premium for it. There is an inherent requirement to deemphasize economics and lend importance to the alternative production practices by appealing to a consumer desire for a particular production method.

Businesses like Snowville and Stoneyfield choose to articulate this emphasis by using images of production practices accompanied by relatively small amounts of texts. Images of sweeping landscapes dotted with cattle pervade the dairy websites. All the businesses incorporate pictures of individual farmers (Figure 8) with dirt on their hands, often referring to the farm and/or the farmer by name.



*Figure 8: Stonyfield web campaign promoting contact with farmers*

Also included are aesthetically striking pictures of produce and food products notable because of their arresting colors and settings. There are frequently images of brightly colored fruits and vegetables contrasted against an earthy background or dairy products displayed on a primitively set table which feature prominently in the continuous slide-show on the sites. In Snowville's brand image, an antiquated milk maid pours cream from a rustic pitcher. This image emphasizes what is the focus of a specialty agriculture company's business model. The milkmaid, responsible for a limited quantity of production, emphasizes the human, personal involvement in food production practices presumably unique to small scale, specialty agriculture. It is interesting to note that Snowville does not employ bonnet-clad milkmaids, but the inclusion of this image fits with the general rhetorical message of the site as a whole. Regardless of

whether or not Snowville's employees look exactly like this, this image represents what is valued by the company. Through the articulation of these shifts in values that accompanies the social movement spurred on by motivated food consumers, the consumer ends up purchasing both the physical product as well as its manufacture history as suggested by the rhetoric of production images. Moreover, images, as opposed to words, allow the business to promote a range of trends from environmental responsibility to local production to natural ingredients whereas texts necessitate more specific and limited claims. And, claims such as "certified USDA organic" bring to the forefront the role of regulatory agencies and certification processes, artifacts of modernity which conflict with the simple, unfettered rhetorical emphasis of specialty agriculture. And so it is images, supplemented with text, that convey the emphasis value added food businesses place on production.

Beyond the pictures of the farm and the products themselves, another noticeable similarity among websites of this kind is the visual emphasis on the material manufacture process of the products (Figure 9). The website for Snowville Creamery has a link titled "production" where a slideshow with captions can be viewed of the history and building of the farm/ production facility. Further along in the slideshow images switch to product production,



following milk from the farm to the store along every step of the process. The Stoneyfield website includes a "Farm Cam" link that allows viewers to watch "Dairy Diary" entries that one of the farm hands records and posts online so that consumers can

*Figure 9:* Image from a blog post "The way milk should be" which shows production images from Snowville

get an idea of “what farm life is really like” and can “learn more about cows, milking, and all things organic.” The rhetoric of each places the viewer in the role of farmer or manufacturer. For example, the homepage for the Snowville Creamery shows a menu bar along the top, but the page is dominated by the image of a handful of cattle standing along the fence line, gazing directly at the viewer. This positioning, where the cattle subjects look back at the viewer, implicate the viewer within the image itself. Not only does this shot give the viewer an opportunity to view the livestock as the farmer would, but in this case, the livestock stare back at the viewer *as if they were* the farmer. In addition, all three websites offer up images of the physical production: harvest, milking, bottling, transportation, and point of sale. Compare this marketing to that of any other product. With few exceptions, the food industry alone is able to market a production process as reason to buy a product. Furthermore, how frequently are production processes, besides in the food industry, virtuized for its resistance to modern production practices? These anomalies point to the deeply rooted issues at play in the minds of motivated food consumers. During an interview, one motivated food consumer explained his resistance to modern food production as follows:

I’m interested in not poisoning myself, so I try not to eat things that have been sprayed with toxins. But how can you really know? I don’t buy produce where I don’t know the source.

(AS: What concerns you about food safety?) This is where I’m glad this is anonymous. I feel like in a more mechanized food system, there is a lot more room for cross-contamination with aggregated food, as opposed to a more broken up system. There’s danger from bigger system, you see massive recalls where you actually have to track products because there part of this huge industrialized model. If farmer Joe is grinding up beef and selling it to his neighbors and his neighbors get sick, they can just call up the other neighbors instead of having to look up a bar code and trace it wherever. The odds of contamination are lower in more dispersed system.

(AS: You said you’re glad it’s anonymous, what do you mean?) Since I’m not a farmer, I’m not as familiar with the challenges that come with food production and meeting the standards. I wouldn’t want farmers to see this from me.

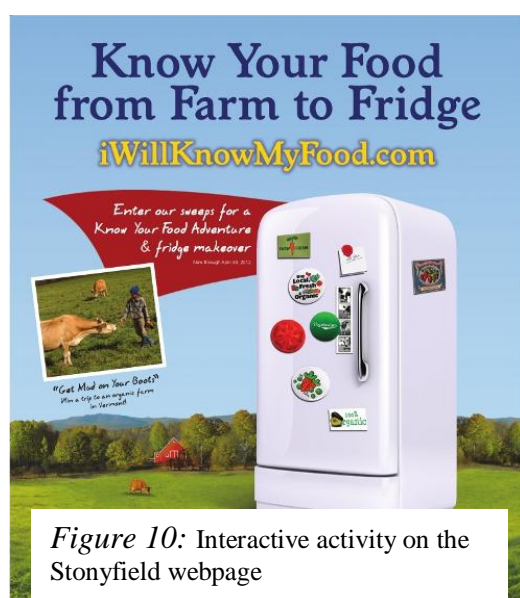
He opens with his concern about knowing/not knowing by mentioning that he only buys produce when the source is known and also suggesting the futility in trying to know what really goes on in commercial food production. Although knowing the person who produces his food seems to alleviate his anxiety concerning commercial food production, this consumer acknowledges that he does not have a firm understanding of the finer points of food production, and the challenges that go along with it. Knowing, then, about the production of his food is important, but seemingly the factual details do not convey as much advantage to asserting control over its production. The sense of being informed and in control comes from having the agency to have food produced by someone whose practices you could vet. It represents a kind of compromise with modernity, a way of gaining knowledge and having control without the investment of having responsibility over the entire system. When asked what influenced his purchasing decisions, one consumer explained it this way, “I look for food with the smallest number of ingredients. (why is that important?) I don’t want to learn about all the ingredients, but I want to know what’s in my food. I want to be able to skim the label and know. For the kids, who are not totally vegan, they’ll say “oh I want that” and I can look at the food and if it looks healthy than they can have it.” Complete control would involve producing all of one’s own food, which is not a feasible option for most people. Motivated food consumers, and it varies by the individual, compromise by recognizing the power of choice, personal relationships, and engagement with available literature as offering a sense of control.

The issues at stake in this compromise are as varied as the sub-trends in the industry. Safety issues are one of the larger conversations being used to negotiate the adoption of modernity. As consumers become less involved with the industry which produces their food, an inherent consequence of modern life, the perceived risk for industrialized, profit driven

companies to cut corners and use practices that conflict with society's sense of right and wrong increases exponentially. DeLuca provides an example of a consumer concern by stating "the system was invented by the people who are poisoning us. The rules say they get to argue over how much cyanide they can put in our coffee, how much poison they can put out before they have to take responsibility for it. That's not a system we can ever win in" (Larry Wilson as quoted by DeLuca, 58). This harkens back to another of DeLuca's claims that the work of environmental groups depends upon a re-articulation of the virtues of a system. In this quotation, the individual expresses concern, specifically about the delegation of safety regulations within large-scale food production. Specialty agriculture businesses seek to appeal to these concerns by offering products which do not adhere strictly to the letter of the law as dictated by regulatory agencies, but instead institute their own set of criteria by which they evaluate food products. Through this mechanism of public interest and marketing appeals volleyed between customer and business, society debates the degree to which it accepts the ascendancy of modern production practices in industries of food and farming.

The rhetoric back and forth between consumer desires and the marketing appeals of food businesses maybe, in and of itself, one of the most persuasive rhetorical strategies of specialty agriculture in addressing consumer demands. In a society where people have total control over only a few daily routines, food production not typically being one of them, the relationship of informed unity between consumer and producer projected in these websites is especially effective. Wadell describes a model for public practice where technical information and emotion based beliefs flow in both directions, from and to, producer and consumer. He says, "the distinction between 'expert' and 'public' begins to blur as does the distinction between audience and rhetor. Under this model, risk communication is not a process whereby values, beliefs, and

emotions are communicated only from the public and technical information is communicated only from technical experts” (Waddell, 142). The websites for the dairies promote transparency between producer and consumer by displaying the Farm Cam, a slideshow of production processing, and images of the farms/farmers producing the food. Education is also valued by both groups as part of a unified effort to promote informed decision making (Figure 10). The underlying message, sometimes included explicitly in various forms, is “we show you the way our food is produced because this is the way you would want your food to be produced.” The



*Figure 10: Interactive activity on the Stonyfield webpage*

dairy websites also includes “community” sections where supporters can comment and send messages to one another and the farm about their beliefs on the milk products. A parallel trend includes the popularization of Farmer’s Markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) programs and herd shares where consumers, some of whom are also the producers, hold stakes in the company, participate in advisory boards,

or in the very least are able to engage directly with producers. These motivated food consumers learn about and contribute to the process of food attainment which helps address societal preoccupations with modernity and the disconnect between the consumer and the food industry.

As important as these interactions are with producers in satisfying consumer desire for awareness and involvement, the representations of farming which promote the bucolic aspects of the industry also appeal to consumer’s sense of what agriculture “should be.” From Michael Polan to the Snowville Creamery, attention is called to the fact that modern farms do not resemble farms of yesteryear and that something seems to be lost due to that change. Snowville’s

tagline is “Milk the way it used to be” and one of the slides on Stonyfield’s site is of a farmer with a cow and reads “i taste the difference... in organic milk from a cow whose farmer knows her by name (and vice versa).” These sites imply that there is a value added to goods produced using methods that are not dictated by profit margins. Moreover, the implication of consumer safety and trust associated with specialty agriculture’s products and their producers further capitalizes on consumer’s anxiety with the parley of the modern/rustic interface. By including images of production processes on their websites, specialty agriculture businesses are able to satisfy the desire of consumers for products fitting their conception of the rustic by offering a semblance of awareness and control on the part of the consumer over the food industry in which they are otherwise uninvolved and overwhelmed by. One consumer explained the grocery store like this, “They’ve become places of great confusion if you don’t go there very often. Now a-days if my husband and I go to super markets we feel overwhelmed.” Giving the overwhelming nature of food procurement and the concerns associated with the food regarding its safety, the actions of motivated food consumers towards asserting control help to impose a kind of order on a massive, overwhelming system. This control not only works to address safety concerns by involving consumers who feel disenfranchised from the system, but by actively engaging with food production, the language of food safety and specialty food businesses is being used to take on larger issues about contemporary society.

## Conclusion

Considering just these three chapter themes suggests the difficulty in concisely capturing and expressing the perspective of motivated food consumers. The themes are simultaneously distinct issues, yet inherently intertwined; both symptomatic of this time, as well as part of larger traditions and social movements. And although each chapter represents only a small portion of the larger conversation, they do touch on some of the most established and shared sentiments, which can serve as the jumping-off point for further consideration and expansion for the inclusion of other relevant issues at work.

Acknowledging the necessity of categorizing the stories and internet material into discrete, thematic chapters allows for the consideration of the issues individually, a kind of compensation for grouping all motivated food consumers into the same category, assuming the same or similar motivations. To an extent, each issue does occupy its own space in the worldview of motivated food consumers, distinct from any other. Moreover, not every motivated food consumer claimed a stake in each topic brought up (although some did). When asked “what do you consider most important when you are deciding to purchase food?” more than one interviewee answered “everything” and proceeded to list a selection of topics. Conversely, others would acknowledge that they were not particularly invested in certain aspects of food production. One motivated food consumer said, “I’m not that concerned with the environment. I mean, I know it’s important, I am just mostly concerned with health for my food.” Even motivated food consumers who acknowledge a more holistic approach may indicate that a particular ideal surpasses others. In the example highlighted at the start of the first chapter, that consumer stated “I don’t support agribusiness. If it has a well known label or is processed, I will not buy it” suggesting that even if big business were selling organic, humanly raised, minimally



processed anything, she still would not be interested. This seemingly distinguishes the issue of corporate food production from, say, the notion of synthetic food. However, the extent to which these things can ever be fully disentangled is limited by the fundamental principles guiding each sentiment. That is to say, the reasons why big business and test tube foods are not to be trusted may be more alike than not. This same consumer may acknowledge that if the business were trustworthy and had the proper motives, she would purchase from them for convenience. And, at the very least, most motivated food consumers suggest that the reason synthetic food products are questionable is because they are produced by amoral, profit seeking companies, thus entangling the themes yet again.

In an effort to again unify the issues discussed by motive food consumers, similar conjectures can be drawn across the chapters. Generally, the issues most important are not unique to the discussion of food safety rumors. The concerns can be traced through larger traditions and social movements but are perhaps newly being applied to food. That is, the use of food production for considering the risks of centralizing and compartmentalizing work, scientific involvement in nature, and production en masse, things generally affiliated with modernity, is perhaps a novel application. In chapter one, the issue of corporation run food production was addressed. Motivated food consumers are averse to food produced by big companies because it is produced by big companies. The sense that independence and self-reliance are virtues is nothing new. Moreover, the sequestering of knowledge and control that results from leaving food production up to a few seems almost anti-democratic in that consumers are not given a say in how it should be done and are forced to accept the results. The decisions of corporations that do not have to answer to another authority have been shown to be problematic; a prime example relating to food safety is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). The publication led to the

adoption of the forerunners to most food safety regulations in existence today, but did not represent a total rejection of the system. When the details about Chicago's meat packing industry came to light, there was outrage which required a change in the system, but the premise of the system itself was not questioned. Now, though, motivated food consumers may anachronistically cite Sinclair's example as reason to eliminate highly commercial operations because of the danger they pose.

Another safety risk on the minds of motivated food consumers is the seemingly synthetic nature of contemporary food, as discussed in chapter two. The influx of complicated ingredients and formulations is disconcerting and leaves many motivated food consumers asking *why*. Why do ingredients need to be manipulated in unnatural ways and what unforeseen consequences result from messing with nature? Contemporary food production is not the first instance in which these questions have been asked; in fact the acceptance of scientific solutions has always raised these kinds of concerns. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one such example where scientific experimentation takes one step too far, leading to disastrous consequences. Dr. Frankenstein tries to create life from an assortment of decaying remains and, really, how conceptually different are GMO's from that exercise? Similarly, complicated ingredients with chemical sounding names suggest the unnatural status of many foods. Artificial sweeteners are some of the best examples since they are affiliated with numerous rumors about their development which notably involves their original intended use for something other than a foodstuff. Traditionally, legends about magic elixirs or powers the protagonist seeks for himself that appear too good to be true typically are. Dr. Jekyll's potion results in tragedy along with Dr. Frankenstein's experiment. The unintended consequences of challenging the natural order of the world seems never to end well, and as one person in the McRib debate put it "you don't get something that delicious from

nothing.” The logic might extend to aspartame, that you can’t have sugar without calories either, at least not without some other cost. Without knowing what potential consequences exist, motivated food consumers resist complicated ingredient labels in favor of simplified formulations which they have more knowledge of and intellectual control over.

Several of the motivated food consumers made a point of saying something to the effect of “I actually know a lot about food/farming.” It is an interesting assertion, or at least the need to make that point is an interesting one. In most conversations it would seem out of place, either because everyone involved is part of the in-group and would, of course, know; or because the information is obviously common knowledge and the contribution of that information would not need to be explained. In this case, however, specialized knowledge about food is neither common nor is the speaker part of the in-crowd of food producers. Instead this knowledge is unusual, and worth pointing out. Additionally, this statement and others concerning the speaker’s avid reading on the topic and engagement with farmers may serve to lend credibility to rumors and legends which might otherwise be received skeptically. In *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*, Turner aptly quotes Tamotsu Shibutani saying, “‘Rumors emerge in ambiguous situations...If the demand for news in a public exceeds the supply made available through institutional channels, rumor construction is likely to occur...The greater the unsatisfied demand for news, the more likely it is that rumors will develop’” (80). Noted also by Frank Kermode, there is a preference in situations lacking a sufficient amount of information for rumors and conspiracy theories. The preference is for some kind of information, even if it is based in conspiracy and shrouded in mystery, than for the complete confusion and isolation that results from no information at all (Kermode 1979, as quoted in Mills 1991:19). The kind of logic and sense of understanding that comes from the transmission of rumors and legends is another iteration of the

impulse to assert control as discussed in chapter three. In a system as large and complex as modern food production, the lay consumer is left out in the cold when it comes to a personal relationship with farming and food, systems which are so ostensibly different than that of the nostalgic farms of yesteryear. The separation between consumers and food production creates an environment ripe for the development of food safety rumors. These rumors are an attempt to impose order on one aspect of chaotic modernity by the adoption of a values system which privileges personal contact and smallness over cost effectiveness and efficiency. And above all things, knowledge is prized by motivated food consumers as the single most important source of power over the system, knowledge of both conventional practices and the way things should be/have been. The channels through which this knowledge is available are varied and rumors, legends, personal anecdotes and the like are a way for motivated food consumers transmit knowledge among themselves.

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